

Understanding Critical Thinking



Using Antonio Gramsci's life and ideas
to illuminate the definition and importance of critical thinking
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What is Critical Thinking?

- An attempt at objectivity
- Investigating the motivations behind actions and rhetoric
- To separate the individual from “culture.”
- The forest from the trees

Gramsci's Childhood and Early Adulthood

- Born in 1891 in a small town in Sardinia
- Health problems
- Rising poverty among peasants and miners
- Brilliant student
- Turin goes through industrialization (Fiat)
- Interested in socialism (1913)
- Becomes a journalist (“Il grido del popolo” and “Avanti!”)
- Education and organization of workers
- Founding of the PCd'I (Italian Communist Party)
- Marries Giulia Schucht, a Russian violinist

A Brief Word on Marxism

- Industrial Revolution gains speed
- New feudalism
- Rise of the bourgeois- means of production
- Proletariat- no control
- Profit
- Capitalism as inherently unjust

Mussolini's Rise to Power and the Creation of Fascism

- Fascist Party founded in 1919 by Benito Mussolini
- Main ideology: to create a strong, clearly defined national character and celebrate that character's attributes; to create a strong national narrative
- Uniformity, group-think, country as family
- Mussolini: a fiery public speaker
- Italy as a superior race (Roman Empire)
- State corporations
- Mussolini as Boss, Father, and Ideal Man
- Complete control of all industry and media
- Propaganda

Propaganda

- All art forms had to support the Grand Narrative
- Only positive- no dissent
- Art as connected to the State
- Italian expansion in Ethiopia

Imprisonment and Death

- November 9, 1926
- Emergency laws against the threat
- Notebooks in isolation
- Failing health
- Death in 1937 is unreported

The Prison Notebooks

- More than 30 notebooks, 3,000 pages
- Short entries
- Italian history, nationalism, Marxist theory, education, Hegemony, the role of the artist/intellectual
- Smuggled out
- Published after the war
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Hegemony

- Distinction between political society (police, army, legal system) and civil society (family, education, art)
- Ideology and consent
- Art as propaganda
- Culture as inescapable
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Culture

- Matrix of definitions, values, priorities
- Soft power
- Distinct binaries (man/woman, intelligent/ignorant, boss/worker)
- Creates consent in unenviable situation
- Accepted as "normal" (status quo)
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The Role of the Intellectual

- Artist as revolutionary (Counter-hegemony)
- Questioning what others blindly accept
- Invert the binaries and challenge those in power
- Not simply interested in aesthetics or entertainment
- Give the audience an alternate reality
- Interrogate the “culture”
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Immediate Impact of the Prison Notebooks

- Italy’s civil war (Red v. Black)
- Re-building both physical and ideological
- Gramsci is embraced by intellectuals
- Italian “neorealismo”
- Film: De Sica, Rossellini, Visconti, Fellini
- Literature: Vittorini, Pavese, Calvino
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Impact on Academia

- Stuart Hall and the emergence of “Cultural Studies” (Popular Culture)
- Univ. of Birmingham, adult education, workers, television
- Education- focus on teaching critical thinking, student based- discussion over lecture, encouraging students to question even the teacher
- Postmodernism- challenge to the “Grand Narratives” (Canon), questions-not answers, limit the strength of culture
- Horror of the Atom Bomb, Holocaust
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Critical Thinking: Conclusion

- As teachers, you are “intellectuals”
- Purveyors of information to future generations
- Awareness of rhetoric, independent minds, more objectivity
- Dissent is a way to improve society and culture